

Latin by the Dowling Method

The Problem About Latin

The problem about Latin is that you can study it for six years and still not be able to read a Latin sentence.

If you study French, you get pretty quickly to a point where you process a French sentence in much the same way you process an English one: "J'ai lu tous les livres" comes across to you as "I've read all the books" and you don't think much about it.

In Latin, you can still be looking at a sentence six years later and doing what I call a "crossword puzzle" reading of it. You find a masculine noun in the ablative singular, then you go hunting around the sentence for an adjective to go with the noun, and if you find one you set those two words aside mentally and go back and look at the verbs.



In short, you're trying to read the sentence somewhat as one assembles a model airplane from a kit: looking at the directions and fitting the parts together and hoping it all makes sense.

The reason this happens is that Latin is a "highly inflected" language and the other modern European languages mostly aren't.

I'll explain "highly inflected" below, but what this means for the short term is that French syntax or German syntax or Italian syntax works pretty much the same way as the English syntax you're used to (subject-verb-predicate, subject-verb-predicate), while Latin doesn't. So you can study it for six years without really learning how to "sweep up" a sentence the way you're reading this sentence right now.

Is There a Recipe for Disaster?

Suppose you want to make sure that, no matter how many years you put into studying Latin, you'll never be able to really "read" a sentence. Is there a recipe for disaster here?

There is.

Here's how to do it: (1) begin studying from Wheelock's *Latin: An Introductory Course Based on Ancient Authors*, (2) following the book, learn little snippets of Latin grammar, always moving around among categories so that you're thoroughly confused -- e.g., study a couple of verb forms the first week, then learn a noun declension, then learn a different verb tense, then move to adjectives -- and (3) make sure that your reading consists of short sentences taken from Latin authors about how the Romans hated money.

This way, you can make sure that you'll never be able to read Latin even if you study it for forty years. It passes the time.

Is There a Recipe for Success?

Yes.

It's described in this guide.

It goes as follows: (1) learn a few simple concepts necessary for understanding Latin grammar -- what the "case" of a noun is, for instance -- then (2) sit down and

systematically learn the main categories of Latin grammar by "brute memorization," and (3) begin reading a great direct-method Latin reader entitled *Lingua Latina*, doing all the end-of-chapter exercises and making sure you understand every word of every sentence.

If you follow this method, you can learn to actually read Latin -- again, to read Latin sentences in the same way you're reading this one -- in about two years of daily work.

Two years sounds like a long time, but it's really nothing in comparison to the world that opens up when you can sit down and read Livy and understand what you're reading. This is like growing wings, or being born into another existence.

What Are These Grammatical Concepts I've Got to Learn?

This is the easy part.

In what follows, I'm going to introduce you to the main concepts and explain them. If you read them with perfect comprehension, you'll be ready to start memorizing the grammatical tables in the back of Wheelock (the only thing his widely-used Latin textbook is any good for).

When you've memorized those, you'll be ready to start reading volume 1 of *Lingua Latina*. You'll be on your way.

First Concept: Noun Cases

In English, it is the order of words in a sentence that tells you what their grammatical function is. Example:

The teacher gives a book to the student.

If you know even a little bit about English grammar, you will be able to say that the verb in this sentence is "gives." (It's the "action" word.) And once you've found the action word, the grammar of the rest of the sentence

can be figured out by seeing how everything else relates to the action.

In this sentence, for instance, you can easily see that "the teacher" is the *subject* of the verb. (It's the teacher who's "doing the giving.") In the same way, you can see that "the book" is the *direct object* of the verb. (The book is what's being given.) You can then see that "the student" is the *indirect object* of the verb. (It's the student to whom the book is being given.)

Don't just rush past my explanations. Go back and read over the previous two paragraphs if you didn't understand them completely. The grammatical concepts I'm presenting here are very simple, but if you don't understand them completely, you won't understand the related Latin concepts I'm about to explain.

Verb = "action word." Subject = "doer of the action." Direct Object = "object of the action." Indirect Object = "recipient or beneficiary of the action." Okay?

I said that in English and the other modern European languages, it is word order that determines grammatical function. Look what happens when we invert the word order of the sample sentence:

The student gives a book to the teacher.

Watch very closely what's going on here. Note that "the student" is spelled just the same here as it was in the earlier sentence. So is "the teacher." The point is that *neither word has changed its form*. All we've done is move "student" up to the front of the sentence and put "teacher" at the end.

But now, to a speaker of English, the whole meaning has changed: it's the student who's doing the giving and the teacher who's doing the receiving of the book. (In grammatical terms, "the student" has become the subject of the sentence and "the teacher" has become the indirect object.)

Do English words ever change their form to indicate a change in meaning?

Yes.

Consider the following:

I *bring* my lunch to school on Thursdays.

I *brought* my lunch to school last Thursday.

The change from *bring* to *brought* signals, in English, a change from the present tense of the verb to the past tense. *Bring* is what is called a "strong verb." It's left over from an earlier stage of English when many more words changed their form -- that is, changed the way they were pronounced and spelled -- *bring/brought* -- to indicate a change in grammatical function.

When a language has a lot of words that change their actual form to signal a change in grammatical function, that language is said to be "highly inflected."

In a highly-inflected language, words mainly show their grammatical function by their form -- that is, you can tell just by looking at the word in isolation what role it plays in the sentence: you don't need word order to tell you -- and so word order doesn't mean as much when you're trying to figure out grammatical function.

This is an important concept, so make sure you're following everything here. In the sentences

The teacher gives a book to the student.

and

The student gives a book to the teacher.

there is simply no way to tell whether "teacher" and "student" is the subject of the verb or the indirect object of the verb without looking at the whole sentence.

Just seeing

the teacher

in isolation gives you no grammatical information at all.

By contrast, in the few cases where English keeps some of its earlier inflections, you don't need a whole sentence to tell you what grammatical function the word is fulfilling. For instance, if you just see

bring

and

brought

sitting there alone on the page, you can say that *bring* is present tense and *brought* is past tense.

In Latin, practically every word in a sentence tells you its grammatical function by its form. Consider this sentence:

Magister dat librum discipulo.

Translation: "The teacher gives a book to the student."

For a number of reasons, that's not a very good Latin sentence, but I want to use it to make a point. The point is this: to someone who reads Latin, the form of "magister" says that "magister" is the subject of the verb. (It is the "magister" who is "doing the giving" here.)

In the same way, "librum" shows by its form that it is the direct object of the verb. (The "librum" is what the magister is giving.)

And finally, "discipulo" shows by its form that it is the indirect object of the verb. (It is the "discipulo" who is getting the *librum* from the *magister*.)

Here comes the important part. **Because each of these nouns shows its grammatical function by its form, that function doesn't change even when you switch the word order around in the sentence.**

Remember how we reversed the meaning of

The teacher gives a book to the student.

just by reversing the word order?

The student gives a book to the teacher.

In Latin, you can put the words of our example sentence in virtually any order you want, and the *magister* keeps on being the person who is doing the giving, the *librum* keeps on being the object that is given, and the *discipulo* keeps on being the person who is being given the book.

For purely stylistic reasons, some of the following are sentences no writer of "good" Latin would ever construct, but in purely grammatical terms they all mean exactly the same thing:

Magister dat librum discipulo.

Librum discipulo magister dat.

Discipulo librum magister dat.

Dat discipulo magister librum.

(etc.)

It gets clumsy after a while to have to keep on saying that "the nouns in the sentence above retain their grammatical function so long as they retain the same form," so grammarians invented a shorthand way of saying the same thing. To say what grammatical function a Latin noun shows by the form in which it is written, you simply mention the *case* of the noun.

This is the main "new" grammatical concept you're going to have to learn to study Latin. When you memorize Latin nouns -- and, as you'll see, adjectives, which have to "agree with" the nouns they modify -- what you really memorize is the cases through which each noun shows its grammatical function in a sentence.

Second concept: the nominative

This is easy. A noun occurs in the nominative case when it is the subject of the verb. In the sentence

Magister dat librum discipulo.

it is the nominative form of *magister* that tells you that the *magister* (teacher) is doing the giving here.

Every case comes in two "numbers," the singular and the plural. Don't let this perplex you. It just means that sometimes the form of the noun shows you that one person or thing is involved, and at other times it shows you that more than one person or thing is involved.

Examples:

Magister dat librum discipulo.**Magistri dant libros discipulis.**

In the second sentence, I've put all the nouns into the plural number. Each noun is in the same case, so the meaning of the sentence stays the same: something is being given by someone to someone else. But in the first sentence it is a single *teacher* who is giving a single *book* to a single *student*. In the second sentence it is two or more *teachers* who are giving two or more *books* to two or more *students*.

Here's some grammatical jargon that I want you to make sure you understand. Don't go on until you're absolutely sure you understand what I'm saying about the two sentences above: 1) In the first sentence "*magister*" is in the *nominative singular*. 2) In the second sentence, "*magistri*" is in the *nominative plural*.

Do you understand that? *Nominative* means, in both sentences, that the noun is showing by its form that it is the subject of the verb. *Singular* means that the sentence is talking only about a single "*magister*." *Plural* means that there are two or more *magistri* giving away books.

Third concept: Accusative and Dative Case

Now I'm going to speed things up a bit.

Here are some more things you can say about the two

sentences above: 1) In the first sentence, "librum" is in the *accusative singular*. 2) In the second sentence, "libros" is in the *accusative plural*. 3) In the first sentence, "discipulo" is in the *dative singular*. 4) In the second sentence, "discipulis" is in the *dative plural*.

Do you see what's going on here? The *accusative* is the Latin case that shows that a noun is the direct object of the verb. (The books are the "things being given" in these sentences.)

The *dative* is the Latin case that shows that a noun is the indirect object of the verb. (The students are the ones "to whom the books are being given" in both sentences.)

The accusative singular shows that only one book is being given. The dative singular shows that only one student is getting or receiving the book. The accusative plural shows that two or more books are being given. The dative plural shows that two or more students are getting the books.

When you get farther along with Latin, you'll learn that cases like the Accusative and the Dative have other uses as well, but these are the ones you want to start with.

Fourth Concept: the Genitive Case

This one is easy too.

The genitive case in Latin usually signals some idea of possession. Somebody or something owns or possesses something else. Here are a couple of simple examples in English of how the genetive works:

The boy's hat was bright red.

The roof of the house was made of tile.

The teacher's book is large.

Now look at the last of these sentences. I'm about to give you the same sentence in Latin. Here it is:

Liber magistri magnus est.

As always, it is the *form* of the noun that tells you what the grammatical function is. In technical terms, you only have to say that "magistri" in the sentence above is in the genitive case, and to understand what that means all you have to understand is that the book belongs to the teacher.

Fifth Concept: the Ablative Case

The ablative is the hardest Latin case to get an "intuitive" feel for, because the Romans used the ablative for all sorts of different grammatical purposes.

Here's the easiest way to make sense of the ablative. In Latin, the ablative tends to do the work that we do in English with common prepositions (*of, on, with, by, for, etc*).

Each of these little words signals some sort of relation between the noun and something else. For instance, you can say

The teacher puts the book *on* the table.

Here, the relation signalled by the preposition *on* is spatial: when the action is complete, one object (a book) is on top of another object (a table) as a result.

This is exactly what happens with the ablative in Latin. Here's the same sentence in Latin with "table" (mensa) in the ablative:

Magister librum *in* mensa ponit.

If you just basically concentrate on this idea, and then extend what you have understood to all the other common prepositions in English (again: *on, in, with, by, from, etc*), you'll never have trouble with the ablative in Latin.

The key is this: when you see an ablative in a Latin sentence, ask yourself what *relation* it is trying to signal

between the noun in the ablative case and everything else in the sentence. Then you will figure out its meaning "intuitively."

Here is a warning. The ablative has so many common uses in Latin that grammarians have figured out names for a lot of them ("ablative of separation," "ablative of the place from which," "ablative of agent," etc).

It is still customary in some Latin courses to try to get students to understand the ablative by teaching them these categories.

My advice: forget the categories. They'll just confuse you, mainly because they get you worrying about non-essential secondary categories when what you want to know is what this ablative *means* in this sentence.

When you're reading your *Lingua Latina* chapters, just go with the flow: learn the ablatives as they come up in the reading, and forget about fancy names for what they are doing.

In the end, you'll have learned all the categories, but without confusing yourself. (Once you've learned how the ablative "works" in its various uses, you can go and get a grammatical table and learn the categories in 10 minutes. "Oh," you say to yourself, "that use is called 'the ablative of the place from which'!" But the important thing is that you were already understanding what it meant.)

Sixth Concept: Adjective Cases

This isn't really a new concept, but I'm putting it under a separate heading to emphasize that you've got to learn adjectives separately from nouns.

The key "concept" is this: adjectives have to agree with the nouns they modify in number and case. That sounds hard. In fact, it's incredibly easy. Start with *modify*.

You may remember from grade school that adjectives are words that give you new information about nouns. The grammarians' way of saying this is to say that the

adjective "modifies" the noun. So:

The teacher had a book.

All you know about the book at this point is, so to speak, that it is a book (i.e., a rectangular object containing print and able to be read by those who understand the language in which it is printed).

But when you add adjectives to the sentence, you begin to get more specific ideas about the book:

The teacher had a large book.

The teacher had a large, old, dusty book.

The teacher had a large, old, dusty, difficult book.

In each of these instances, you say that an adjective ("large," "old," "dusty," "difficult") is adding something new to ("modifying") your idea of the book owned by the teacher.

The point about number and case simply means that adjectives in Latin have to be singular when the noun is singular, plural when the noun is plural, and display by their form the same grammatical function as the noun they are modifying:

Magister librum magnum habet. (The teacher has a large book.)

Magister libros magnos habet. (The teacher has [some] large books.)

The great news about adjectives is that they all have the same endings as one of the noun declensions you will already have learned. You do have to learn that adjectives belong to different declensions, but their forms are ones you'll already know from having memorized the noun declensions earlier.

Seventh Concept: Verb Tense and Mood

I'm not going to give you examples of Latin tenses and

moods, but I want to remind you of what tense and mood are before you start memorizing Latin verb tables.

Tense just means that the form of a verb tells you the *time* in which the action described by the verb took place:

I *brought* my friend a book. (past tense)

I *bring* my friend a book. (present tense)

I *will bring* my friend a book (future tense)

In both English and Latin, verb tenses allow speakers and writers of the language to do wonderfully complicated things, and these things all have complicated names in the grammar books.

Look at the shifts of time implied by the verbs in this sentence, for instance:

**By the time you finish your study of *Lingua Latina*,
you will have been one of the most conscientious
readers ever to have started the study of Latin this
way.**

Do you see what the verb lets the sentence do there? It takes the reader all the way up into a future state of affairs and lets them look back at it as a completed action or event.

Complicated tenses like that have complicated names (in both English and Latin), and these you do have to learn. But if you get the idea of each tense before you start learning, you will never have any trouble remembering what each one does.

And Latin verbs "behave" in wonderfully symmetrical ways: they are easy to memorize once you get a feel for how each tense is behaving. (This is impossible to explain ahead of time. You'll see what I mean when you start memorizing your verb tables.)

Eighth Concept: Verb Mood

Verbs come not only in tenses but in moods, which are, roughly speaking, the "conditions of reality" in which the action described by the verb takes place.

The two major moods for you as a student of Latin are going to be the indicative and the subjunctive.

Since Latin uses the subjunctive a lot more than English, and for much subtler purposes, you're going to have to memorize the tables and then start reading before you can really get a feel for what's going on with mood in Latin verb forms. But I would like you to have some preliminary feel for the concept.

Roughly, indicative means that the action reported by the verb "really happened." That is, it describes a really-existing state of affairs. (Or one that really did take place, or that really will take place.) Examples:

I went to the store.

I am writing a guide to Latin grammar for my students.

I will read Livy when I'm done writing this section.

The subjunctive, on the other hand, normally deals with some state of affairs that "departs from reality" in an essential way. I'm not going to try to illustrate the Latin subjunctive -- it would only confuse you -- but I want to give you one English example to show you what's going on. Here is a sentence with the verb in the subjunctive in English:

If I were President of the United States, I would institute an award for students who learned Latin.

The reason the verb is subjunctive there, in short, is to show that I am asking my listener to imagine what is called a hypothetical or contrary-to-fact state of affairs. The little word "were" is doing a lot of work. It is saying, in effect, "Look, I am *not* in fact the President of the United States, but if I *were* President -- a situation I am now asking you briefly to imagine as fact -- then I would"

(etc).

Just get this simple distinction between the indicative and the subjunctive into your head now and the more complex cases will take care of themselves when you begin to read *Lingua Latina*.

Ninth Concept: Verb Voice

The voice of a verb is either active or passive. The best way to understand this concept is to go look it up in a freshman comp book if you've forgotten. Here is the principle:

Active: John cooked the turkey.

Passive: The turkey was cooked by John.

Got it? Roughly speaking, the active voice signals that a person is performing or carrying out an action. The passive voice puts the object of the verb up into the subject position and says that the action was done "to" it: "The turkey was cooked by John."

The active and passive have different forms in Latin. They're easy to learn and easy to understand. Just memorize the tables.

Tenth Concept: Deponent Verbs

This is the hardest concept you have to learn when you start studying Latin, and it's hard because there's nothing like it in English. The idea is simple enough, though: in Latin, certain verbs that have passive forms have active meanings. These are called "deponent" verbs.

What makes the concept difficult to deal with is that there's nothing "intuitive" about it to a speaker of English. If you could imagine a situation in which I could say

The turkey was cooked by John.

and mean

John cooked the turkey.

you'd have a rough idea of what goes on with deponent verbs. But, unfortunately, English grammar doesn't allow that.

Latin grammar does. Most grammar books put off teaching the use of the deponent forms, because they think that students will only be confused by them. But the Romans used deponents interchangeably with regular verbs, and *Lingua Latina*, to its great credit, starts you right out with them.

So you are going to have to get used to the idea "passive form, active meaning" pretty early in your study of Latin.

That's the bad news.

The good news is that, when you memorize your tables of regular verbs, you'll be learning the passive forms of all the major conjugations as a matter of course. This means that you are already learning the deponents without being aware of it.

In short, learning deponent verbs simply means that you have to understand something you've already learned ("this form signals the passive voice") in a different way ("Oops: this verb is a deponent, so the passive form here has an active meaning.")

Don't let all this talk about passive forms and active meanings discourage you. It sounds hard right now because you don't know any Latin verb forms, active or passive.

When you've begun to memorize your tables, everything will fall into place, and you'll come back to this section and understand exactly what I'm talking about. (You'll also say to yourself: "How could I have ever thought that this was hard?")

Stage 2: Memorizing the Forms

Students today aren't used to memorizing, so even small

tasks of memorization seem hard. But the only way to really learn Latin is to memorize the major grammatical forms systematically.

It isn't as hard as it looks. Think of this: you might have been in a high school play once where you had to memorize an entire part, or perhaps you had a friend who had to memorize a part. And maybe your friend wasn't terrifically bright. (A lot of good actors aren't.)

And yet he or she memorized the part without any trouble, because they knew that was the only way to get applause on opening night.

The amount of memorization you have to do to get ready to read *Lingua Latina* is less than you'd have to memorize to be in a high school play. There are two steps involved:

1) Write out the tables. To really memorize grammar, you have to write out the tables repeatedly. (Grammarians call these "paradigms," pronounced like "pair - ah - dimes." That's because each form in the table shows you how hundreds or thousands of similar nouns or verbs or adjectives work in Latin.)

Get a bunch of blank notebooks. Start with the noun declensions. Write out each declension until you know it by heart. Then go on to the next one. When you've memorized all the declensions, write out the entire table of noun declensions 200 times.

Keep count in your notebook of how many times you've written out the complete set. When you've done it 200 times, you will know Latin nouns by heart for the rest of your life.

When you've finished the nouns, go on to adjectives. Repeat the process you went through with the nouns. (Write out all the adjectives in a single table only 100 times: you know these forms from having learned your nouns.)

Then do the regular verbs in the indicative active. Then do them in the indicative passive. Then do the

subjunctives. How long it takes to memorize each of these tables and write them out 200 times will depend on how much daily time you have to put into the project.

You should be able to get through the whole set in about 6 months. This will be the most essential time you spend learning Latin. Everything else is easier.

2) Say the paradigms to yourself. When you're going through the "memorization stage," use the dead time that occurs during the day to say the paradigms to yourself.

If you're waiting for a bus or standing in line in a store or waiting to see the doctor, repeat a noun declension or a verb conjugation. The amount of "dead time" that occurs during a normal day is amazing, and if you use it efficiently you will speed up the memorization process by a tremendous amount.

Stage 3: *Lingua Latina*

This is the exciting part.

When you've written out all your tables 200 times each, you are ready to start reading volume I of *Lingua Latina*. This is a "direct method" book that starts you off with very simple Latin, and that tells a story about a Roman family living around the time of Augustus.

The book is very hard to find in American bookstores. Almost impossible, in fact. But the wonderful thing is that, in this age of the Web, you can order it online. Just click here on [*Lingua Latina*](#).

It has wonderful exercises and introduces grammatical concepts and vocabulary very gradually, so that you're almost not aware that you're learning new things as you go along. But you go from the simplest Latin sentences to reading unaltered Livy in a series of easy, graduated steps.

When you've finished *Lingua Latina*, you can read any Latin you encounter. You will have a very large Latin

vocabulary and lots of practice with grammar, so for the rest of your life all you'll need to do is keep on reading to stay in practice.

Here's how to use *Lingua Latina*:

1) Read slowly, and make sure that you understand the grammatical function of every word. This is absolutely essential. If you start with the first lesson and read the sentences so that you "sort of get the idea of the sentence," all your memorization and practice will be wasted.

You've got to ask yourself what the case of every noun is as you read -- and ask yourself why it's in that case -- and the tense and mood of every verb, and make sure you understand the prepositions, the adjectives and the adverbs. But if you do this, you will understand every sentence perfectly, and your Latin reading ability will increase by leaps and bounds.

2) When you've finished each lesson, study the grammar section until you understand its presentation of the material you have already memorized. This is where your "partial understanding" of the forms in the tables becomes "real" understanding. You've got to take the grammar sections slowly and read them aloud until you are sure you understand all the material.

3) Then take a notebook and write out a complete version of each Pensem exercise. The pensa are the best thing about *Lingua Latina*. At the end of each chapter, you must be able to fill out each pensem without looking back at the chapter to check grammatical forms. If you have to check back, then you need to read the chapter all over again, slowly, until you can do the pensa out of your own head.

Keep a separate Pensem Notebook for your exercises. Clearly indicate the chapter and section of each pensem. When you've completed all three exercises, then you may go back to the chapter to see that all your answers are correct. (Do the pensa in black ink, mark your

answers in red. Then when you come back to check your work several weeks or months from now, it will be clear to you what you mastered easily and what you needed to study more.)

4) Repeat this process for each chapter until you have completed all of *Lingua Latina*. When you've done this, you will be a competent reader of Latin, both poetry and prose. From now on, all you have to do is keep in practice and you will be a respectable Latinist for the rest of your life.

Good Luck

One last principle.

The only way to learn a language is to work on it every day.

This is something most people never figure out, and it is why most people are no good at languages.

This isn't simply a matter of "discipline." It has something to do with the learning process -- my guess is, with the way the synapses in your brain work when you're learning grammar and syntax.

If you work on a hit-or-miss basis, missing an occasional day and then trying to make up for it by putting in twice as much time the next day you study Latin, you'll never learn the language. My motto: it is far better to put in 30 minutes every day for seven days (3 1/2 hours) than to wait until Saturday and put in 8 straight hours then.

Don't ask me why this is so. I'm not a neurologist. But I have spent over 30 years studying languages, and I'm telling you it's true.

The matter of "discipline" comes in this way. Even when you make up your mind to do your Latin every day, life has a way of intruding so that you will be tempted to miss days. There will be crises and upsets and intrusions and excitements, and your feeling will be that "missing just one day can't hurt."

It does hurt. You've got to do your Latin every day, through death and disease and accidents and heartbreak, when you're travelling and when you're at home, when you're in school and when you're on vacation.

The best way to do this is: do your Latin first thing every morning, before you do anything else. Then, no matter what happens for the rest of day, they can't take your Latin lesson away from you.

When you're travelling, take your *Lingua Latina* along with you. When I was first starting to use the method I'm describing here, I did an amazing amount of Latin on buses and trains and sitting around airports.

It's interesting and fun, and it beats watching the fat lady over at the Baskin & Robbins stand buy her kid an ice cream cone.

Good luck!

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